Blind, lost in the night, endless night that nursed you! You can’t hurt me or anyone else who sees the light – you can never touch me.

Oedipus
the 1960s such as Site, a work deeply rooted in Morris’s “phenomenological endgames.” Here also we witness the art-labor-production cycle.

As in the earlier works, the artist/performer provides the labor participating in the unfolding drama event which culminates in the making of a drawing, a Blind Time drawing in fact. Traditionally drawings are regarded as the most intimate works of an artist because they constitute the visual forms of his thought. Seen often as the preliminary drafts or preparatory works of a final piece, they are the source works scholars usually examine in researching the artist’s original ideas, as one would turn to the notebook or diary. Certainly this is the case with many of Morris’s drawings as well. Yet even when they might be preparatory works related to other pieces, his drawings can be considered autonomous and self-sustaining. One might say they are often public presentations right from the start. In the tradition of Marcel Duchamp, Morris in the 1960s seemed to value the idea over the artwork itself.

He then went even further by creating drawings that were not representational images but instead were texts only. Litanies, his first text-drawing, was created in 1961. For two and a half hours Morris repeatedly wrote the words “Litanies of the Chariot” from Duchamp’s notes for The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even, also known as The Large Glass (1915-23). Morris kept track of the time needed to make the work and recorded it on the drawing.

Time and date are also recorded on each of the five Memory Drawings two years later (Figs. 1-5). Created over a two-month period in September and October 1963, these drawings show Morris’s interest in scientific theories of memory, perhaps suggesting a kind of mockery of the celebrated achievements of science and technology. The artist drew the first piece and memorized it. He then reproduced the narrative from memory four times on four subsequent occasions separated by geometric progression intervals of 4, 8, 16 and 32 days. The essence of this work then was the revelation of the significant extent of change evident in each reiteration, the result of his own memory lapse. Self-sustaining and with no dependence on the realization of other projects on paper or canvas, or in stone, lead, felt or any other traditional or non traditional medium, the definitive works were the writings themselves. Although such freestanding narratives are common in Asian art as exemplified by calligraphy, nothing quite like these pieces had existed in Western art. That these text-drawings created quite a sensation when first exhibited is hardly surprising.

Language as a form of human behavior has always been important to Morris’s art and his interest in the relationship of visual experience to words is well known. In the 1970s, he incorporated text into his “image” drawings, eventually coming up with the

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2 For more on this subject, see Nena Tsouti-Schillinger, Robert Morris and Angst (New York: George Braziller, 2001), 95-99.
idea of creating drawings with his eyes closed. The year 1973 marked the beginning of an ongoing series of drawings entitled *Blind Time*. In his essay “Writing with Davidson: Some Afterthought after Doing Blind Time IV: Drawing with Davidson,” Morris discusses some of the reasons behind these works, including an “ambition for, and a search to find, a basis for drawing other than straightforward representation, on the one hand, and the nonrepresentational on the other.”³ He adds:

_A long series of experiments (all rejected) involving the body addressing the sheet of paper under various constrains led (perhaps by chance?) to the attempt to work by not watching the page. The ambition to put drawing on a new footing may have been there, but this may not have been the reason the drawings were made in the first place. Such reasons sound too much like rationalizations put forward after the fact._⁴

This writer intends neither to illuminate fully the works nor to supply the reader with “all” the answers. Perhaps the closest response might best be found in his following quotation from Wittgenstein: “Have I reasons? The answer is my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons.”⁵

Morris has completed six *Blind Time* series to date. For each drawing, the process never varied; they are all based on the same technical structure. He planned a task, estimated the time needed to carry it out, closed his eyes, covered his hands with powdered graphite or graphite mixed with oil (or ink, as in the case of the last two of the series), and began to draw by rubbing and touching his hands to the surface of the paper in order to complete the task as planned. Once finished, he calculated the difference between the estimated and the actual time it took for him to complete the drawing. This he then recorded on the image along with the description of the planned task.

The series *Blind Time I* (Fig. 6) was made in 1973. As with all *Blind Time* drawings, the concept of process is primary and explicit. Traces of Morris’s touch are visible; he has registered the process of the making in relation to pressure, distance, location and so on. But perhaps these drawings are more about the time that has elapsed from the beginning of the process to the completion of the task.

Similarly, time is recorded in one of his earliest and revolutionary works, *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961 (Fig. 7), a cube made from walnut containing a tape recording of the various sounds produced during the three and one half hour time it

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took Morris to complete the box; another work harking back to the Duchampian tradition likewise reflecting the artist’s fascination with the time factor.

Ninety-eight drawings were completed in 1973. As he himself stated, “That was really obsessive.”

In 1976 Morris began a second series, *Blind Time II* (Fig. 8). Through the American Association of the Blind he employed a woman known to us only as A.A., who had been blind since birth. While applying ink on paper with her hands, A.A. followed his oral direction. This is a natural extension of the project, similar to the manner in which some of Morris’s other works have been produced by anonymous assistants under his direction. However, in the case of A.A., the situation was different because having been blind since birth, she could not possibly grasp certain criteria for some things—for instance, perspective and how objects appear smaller in the distance.\(^6\) Fifty-two drawings were directed by Morris and drawn by A.A. in this series. One can get an idea of the difficulties of this project from the recorded conversations between Morris and A.A., excerpts of which are transcribed beside each drawing.

Morris’s language/image juxtapositions continued into the *Blind Time III* series (Fig. 9) made in 1985. In this case, however, in addition to the text by Morris detailing the physical task, the artist included a second text with comments on the philosophy of physics (as it relates to perception and our notion of reality), thermodynamics (the science of energy) and related physicists. Referring to the 19\(^{th}\)-century Austrian Ludwig Boltzmann, who formulated the second law of thermodynamics,\(^7\) and to the Danish Nobel laureate Niels Bohr, who participated in the atomic bomb project at Los Alamos, New Mexico in 1944, some of the drawings suggest deep concerns focused on perils associated with modern technology and innovations, the nuclear bomb, and the devastation of war. To quote Morris:

> Working blindfolded for an estimated 7 minutes, the hands begin working together in the attempt to rub out orderly rows. Progressing toward the right, pressure increases in proportion to the increasingly dissimilar motions made between the right and left hands.

> For Boltzmann, who formulated the second law of thermodynamics, as the probable tendency for systems to move toward less order, his belief in atoms occasioned merciless attacks from phenomenologists. Information degenerated into noise, his hope into despair and his life into the entropic void when he committed suicide Sept. 6, 1904.

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\(^7\) The first law concerns the conservation of energy, not the direction in which processes may proceed. It is the second law of thermodynamics dealing with the direction of processes that states that every process a thermodynamic system may undergo can go in one direction only and the opposite process, in which both the system and its surroundings would be returned to their original states, is impossible. Examples of the law’s validity can be seen in life every day.
Entropy, one should bear in mind, is sometimes presented as the essence of the second law of thermodynamics. In the natural course of events, energy is continually expended in the transformation of matter (as in any chemical process) and the production of work. And if all such processes are irreversible, as believed, then the total entropy of the universe is increasing (more and more energy becomes unavailable for conversion into mechanical work). As a result, the universe is gradually, inevitably “winding down” in a process of slow decay.

In light of this, one might now better understand Morris’s interest in entropy and how he considers this notion in his work. In a 1995 interview with Christophe Cherix originally published in *Notes on Print: With and after RM*, Morris talks about that:

> If there had been a fourth Fate perhaps she would have been Entropy – the one who tangles the thread: A kind of goddess of antiform. Parmenides would not have liked the lady but Heraclitus would have welcomed her. Devolution, accident, the drift between intention and the act, the misshapen and the failed, age, death, the ironic: antihumanism personified.⁸

More evidence of that concern can be seen when in 1997 he stated about his work *Tar Babies of the New World Order* that “Tar Babies, like matter itself, can never be destroyed, only transmuted. Immune to the second law of thermodynamics, it is suspected that Tar Babies might spontaneously erupt from dung heaps.”⁹

Surely the viewer/reader is able to now glean “some” answers from these excerpts of Morris’s writings. Without a trace of human sentimentality, he suggests perhaps that something terrible is eventually bound to happen, although just “what” and “where” are not revealed.

Yet it is not merely the theme of nuclear destruction and world decay that provokes a sense of discomfort and restlessness in the viewer of *Blind Time III*, but rather Morris’s visual language, his manipulation of these drawings. The observer is confronted with abstract images encompassing the use of light and darkness in a sometimes haunting combination. The contrast of black and white, the striking black marks and patterns that often dominate and the vestiges of Morris’s hands make the images surprisingly aggressive.

A dialog with other works, such as the lead imprints and body casts of the 1960s, or his hydrocals of the ‘80s points to an endless number of parallels and cross-references.

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But perhaps it is in the series *Blind Time IV (Drawing with Davidson)* in 1991 (Fig. 10) that a viewer feels mentally trapped, forced to fully comprehend and witness the actual process of Morris executing the drawing, thus inviting him to bring the past into the present. Traces of Morris’s hands on the paper have been recorded in such a way that viewer participation seems unavoidable. As Kimberley Paice points out, unlike his earlier series, the *Blind Time IV (Drawing with Davidson)* drawings often employ recognizable imagery such as Cézanne’s paintings of *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, or other shapes such as squares, rectangles, crosses, plusses and minuses fixed to the paper before the action. Morris’s attempts and intentions are described by the artist himself on the lower left corner of the drawing. That is to say, a viewer is invited to participate by examining and comparing, on the one hand, Morris’s intentions and on the other the outcome. Then, alongside Morris’s own handwritten text, a fragment excerpted from the philosopher Donald Davidson’s *Essays on Actions and Events* is juxtaposed.11

John Haldane, the Director of the Center for Philosophy and Public Affairs at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, once said that “there is an ancient tradition of opposing art and philosophy. According to this, art concerns sensible appearances whereas philosophy concerns intelligible realities; art is a matter of practical skill while philosophy is an exercise of rational understanding; art engages the emotions, philosophy addresses the intellect.” Morris’s interest in philosophy is well known and he is indeed a prolific writer on the subject. It comes as no surprise then that in the *Blind Time IV (Drawing with Davidson)* series he is found drawing philosophical concepts.12

It is widely accepted that the complex symbolism of Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I* is a spiritual self-portrait of the artist himself. Based primarily on concepts derived from Florentine Neo-Platonism, the work shows a seated winged figure lost in thought and surrounded by the contemporary instruments of the arts and sciences. This winged genius is the personification of knowledge, which without divine inspiration appears unable to fly, to act. She seems defeated by human frailty. According to the astrological theory of the day, such a person is identified with Saturn/Cronus, the Titan of Greek mythology who is said to have swallowed his own children, and is thus characterized by melancholia bordering on madness that either

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11 In conversations with the author, Morris has often expressed his interest in Davidson’s work on language and interpretation.

12 For an important discussion on the meeting of the two minds of Morris and Davidson in the *Blind Time IV* series, see Kenneth Surin, “Getting the Picture: Donald Davidson on Robert Morris’s *Blind Time Drawings IV (Drawing with Davidson)*,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:1 (Winter 2002), 133-169.
plunges him into deep despair or conversely raises him to the heights of creative frenzy. Dürrer (like Michelangelo) was regarded as suffering from this malady.

Certainly the 1999 Blind Time V: Melancholia drawings (Fig. 11), as well as the installation in Tuscany entitled Melencolia II, 2002 (Fig. 12), invoke Dürrer’s famous engraving, suggesting a dialogue between past and present. But does Morris also perceive himself to be one of the great masters of the Renaissance, some genius who struggles to translate the pure idea in his mind into visible matter? Furthermore, Cronus is not only associated with melancholy but also with time—both themes figure prominently in Morris’s art.

The commentaries on the Blind Time V: Melancholia drawings are personal: memories of friends who passed away such as Edward Fry and Alan Buchsbaum, or childhood memories when he recalls, for instance, his blacksmith grandfather’s hands. The text in this drawing reads:

*Working blindfolded, estimating the lapsed time, and approaching the page from the top, I concentrate on remembering my blacksmith Grandfather’s huge, callused, and misshapen hands. I rub downward trying to expand the imprints of my own hands to the size I felt his to be when I was seven and sitting beside him at sundown while he told me a story about snakes and foxes as he casually dipped his hands into a basket of crayfish he had seined that afternoon. When several crayfish had fastened their pincers onto his rough fingers he drew up his bands and proceeded to crack off their tails, throwing the heads over the fence to the chickens without a pause in the story. I make pinching motions at the bottom of the page, and finally, I rub the edges of the page trying to generate something like the heat we felt on our backs as we leaned against the sun-warmed house on that hot, Missouri July evening so long ago. No time error as watch stopped.*

The shapes fixed to the paper before the action in the Blind Time V: Melancholia series and the objects in the Melencolia II installation are, of course, geometric, all three out of Dürrer’s famous engraving: the polyhedron, the wheel and the sphere.

Melencolia II is a collaboration between Morris and Claudio Parmiggiani. Morris’s three pieces are made from alicarnasso marble, Parmiggiani’s column from cipollino marble and the bell from bronze. This work is installed in a bamboo grove on a site where there once stood a pre-Romantic garden, now a sculptural theme park, in Fattoria di Celle in Tuscany. It is not visible from outside; one must enter the bamboo grove. The impact is immediate and physical, this being one of Morris’s most captivating and visually breathtaking installations. The space has become part of the work it entails. Nature (bamboo and earth) itself has suddenly intruded as one of the integrated

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13 For more on this subject, see Morris, *TELEGRAM/THE RATIONED YEARS* (Geneva: JRP Editions, 1998).
components of the installation. The initial impression is that of quiet, contemplative space soothingly illuminated by leaf-shaded sunlight. But once the eyes readjust to the reduced brightness, the mood switches to one of heightened physical oppression which visitors feel, as they weave among the bamboo plants seeking out the five pieces. Deep inside, the sky now obscured by the bamboo canopy, the atmosphere seems to move further toward melancholy and finally a growing restlessness sets in.

Another disturbing feature is that like his nearby Labyrinth (Fig. 13), this installation sits not on a level plane but on sloping ground, making progress awkward and difficult. The work is experiential and comes alive with the viewer’s participation. Time must be spent moving through the bamboo and among the polyhedron, the sphere, the wheel, the bell and the column. One has no choice but to deal with space, which is at the same time open and confined — also characteristics shared with Morris’s nearby Labyrinth and all his labyrinths in general.

I asked Morris if the Melencolia II, the 2002 installation in Fattoria di Celle, proceeded from his 1999 set of Blind Time V: Melancholia drawings and just what relationship can be drawn between them. His long answer is worth quoting:

> Maybe the angel in Dürer’s print is blind. Maybe the angel could feel around the landscape for the polyhedron, the sphere, the mill wheel, the bell. But what would the angel learn? Vision is not the issue in this image, it seems to me. Anyway not literal seeing. The angel stares off into space. Unseeing or blind. Maybe the angel is thinking. But we would not know what such thoughts are about. We humans are, according to Chomsky, somewhere on a scale between rats and angels. A rat could not solve a maze requiring the application of prime numbers. So why should we have answers to questions about the self, the mind/body relation, consciousness, a priori knowledge, etc.? And would we really want to know what the angel knows about these things? We should be satisfied with our blindness about such questions. But of course we are not. Anymore than the angel is satisfied with not having answers to those unimaginable questions angels ask. The angel’s is a superior brand of blindness. Melancholia is the condition of mourning for answers that don’t arrive — on whatever level the questions might be asked. Let the relations between disc, polyhedron and sphere stand as allegory for relations between sets of questions without answers — whatever level these might exist on. Off in the distance a bat holds the scrolled inscription "Melencolia" — thought flying blind, mocking the angel who sits immobile, the tools surrounding him/her (I don’t think this angel has a sex, or is both) abandoned. We are witnessing a scene of great restraint: the angel sits passively and blind. Universes might collapse in fiery implosion should the angel lose its patience and actually act. Wouldn’t we like to think. Wouldn’t we like to think the massive physique beneath that robe was a metaphor for potentiality. But look again. Dürer went deeper. There is only mockery here. Mockery of the great Other. Or rather mockery of our impulse to extend authority to the Other. Mockery of our incorrigible compulsion to first dream up the other and then endow him with power. Dürer mocks transcendence itself in the
image of this hulking incompetent sitting passively, surrounded by scattered tools he doesn't know how to use, staring blindly into space. This strapping angel can make sense of nothing, make use of nothing, get off his butt and do anything. The dividers, the balance, the bourglass, the carpentry tools, the ladder, the nails — these will wait for all eternity for this brainless ox of an angel to act. The image is subversive in the extreme. Melancholia is the condition of never learning, of being taken in by our own inflated hopes. Melancholia is the condition of expectation. Melancholia is the bet placed on the long shot. Of course the most melancholy condition imaginable would be no more horse races, no more making fun of angels.

On the drawings I always started with the sphere, the polyhedron and the disc. I traveled from one to the other in my blindness, learning nothing. I am always reduced in the Blind Time drawings to my lowest levels. Groping and pathetic, absent the illusions of sight. Fragmented and spastic, absent the illusions of wholeness. Subhuman, beneath the angel's suffocating skirt. And freed into a chthonic realm where it is easy to hold my breath. Freed to act outside of expectations set for the enterprise by others. Freed to feel for my darker lump of being.

White marble and bamboo and the steep ravine. A dim but visible scene. The bell is reassuring, and it makes a bell-like sound. The anxiety between the five objects is mild. And the available names reassure. Maybe a certain smug nominalism prevails, but there are no dark lumps lying around. I can still hear the echo of the conversation with Parmiggiani. The suffocation of blindness does not threaten. No bat flits through the bamboo with inaudible screams of warning. It is of course possible that Kesselring walked the ravine 60 years ago with dried blood on his boots. We know he was in the area and we know what he did. But "Melencolia II" commemorates no past atrocity. Nor does it mark any site of angelic blindness. The angel has long ago taken leave of the site with a smirk. And that's a relief. There is air here and a certain filtered light and the earth is soft underfoot. It is quiet and contemplative. There are no inhuman demands placed upon us here. That sudden drop of soft, heavy blindness, that suffocating weight of the angel's skirt falling over our breathing does not threaten here. Neither threat nor mockery presides at this site because we have banished that overbearing lout of an angel.14

The Blind Time VI series was created in 2001 (Fig. 14). All the drawings in this series include notations with the epithet “moral,” which is fixed to the paper before the action, bringing to mind Aristotle’s “Nicomachean Ethics,” his work on virtue and moral character.15 Aristotle’s approach to ethics is not in terms of absolutes but of what is conducive to man’s good. He believes that man needs ethical virtues (ἀρετές), in order to improve his life. Morris, like Aristotle, treats moral problems in terms of the potentialities of individual men. And one, like in Ethics, can find a picture of himself in

14 Robert Morris, e-mail correspondence with the author, New York, 1 June, 2003.

15 Aristotle’s work Nicomachean Ethics comprise of ten books which are based on notes from his lectures at the Lyceum between 335-323 B.C., and were dedicated to his son Nicomachus.
the Blind Time VI drawings. However, while Aristotle, in order to identify the highest good with the attainment of happiness (ευδαιμονία) examines various kinds of good, Morris seems to investigate the opposite, various kinds of evil; with such notations on the drawings as “Moral Disdain,” “Moral Void,” “Moral Chaos,” “Moral Amnesia” and “Moral Limit.” Even in the drawing with the notation “Moral Search” his tone is pessimistic. The text inscribed by Morris, which is expanded in two directions, reads:

Working blindfolded with ink on the left hand and water right I begin at the upper left to make convoluted marks with the inked left and then try to superimpose identical watermarks with the right. There is the attempt here to first mark and then obliterate. I work an estimated halfway across and down. Then I switch to ink on the right hand and water on the left and proceed as before, but this time I work from the right edge inward. After my groping attempts to simultaneously map and obliterate convoluted marks I try to draw the blind over the page.

Time estimation error: -3’14”

The nature of the moral, being an a priori faculty, is not revealed to us. And even empirically guided effort to locate the ethical in spatial and causal terms is doomed to failure. Imagine staring blindly at the convolutions of the brain and expecting the map of consciousness to reveal itself. And this expectation is as absurd as expecting that the mind, because of its capacity to represent some aspects of the world, could also represent itself.

Also visually striking, these drawings reveal a number of qualities, most clearly their fine texture and tactile sensibility. They are more demanding in the sense that a viewer is asked not only to decipher the text, which is often intertwined with the “image,” but to read it in reverse as if seen in a mirror – the text is written on the back of the mylar. Perhaps Morris simply does not want us to read the text, or perhaps he is trying to emphasize the convoluted, nearly incomprehensible dialog of present turbulent times. The only recognizable imagery, that of a window blind, seems somehow to confront the viewer.

In the drawing with the notation “Moral Void,” one reads:

Working blindfolded with ink on the hands I first touch the page near the top and then work down toward the center increasing the pressure as I feel the ink become dryer beneath the fingers. And I continue rubbing as though into an emptiness, as though the pressure of the fingers pressed against nothingness. Finally I try to trace the outline of the drawn blind.

Time estimation error: -1’23”

As I work I think of this monstrous, self-congratulatory age, so free of moral doubt, so assured in its fatuous, self-centered distractions, so avid for and transfixed by its public inanities, so full of faith in the endless flow of its marketable drivel, so obese and adrift in its technological glut.
Could it be he has given such messages a Leonardo-style reversal in *Blind Time VI* to underscore the widespread self-denial of contemporary messages we prefer not to hear or accept?

All the familiar elements that characterize Morris’s art throughout his career we see, sense and experience in these *Blind Time* drawings. Process, perception, memories and time are all retained in these works, translating pure mind’s idea into visible entity. The viewer participates, visually first and then mentally, by witnessing Morris the artist, the worker, the performer, attempting to accomplish his predefined task; whether he does so or not is irrelevant. The impact of the result still endures providing us some insight into our own personal sightless voids.

We might relate to Morris’s recollection in his “rationed years” of an instance when, as a child, he laid himself out in the closed confines of the family cedar chest and became “enfolded in the spiced smell of pitch blackness.”


List of Illustrations:

**Fig. 1.** *Initial Memory Drawing (9/3/63, 8:00 P.M.),* 1963. Ink on paper, 20 ½ X 13 inches (52.1 X 33 cm). Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of Robert Morris.

**Fig. 2.** *First Memory Drawing (9/4/63, 9:00 P.M.),* 1963. Ink on paper, 20 ½ X 13 inches (52.1 X 33 cm). Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of Robert Morris.

**Fig. 3.** *Second Memory Drawing (9/8/63, 12:00 P.M.),* 1963. Ink on paper, 20 ½ X 13 inches (52.1 X 33 cm). Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of Robert Morris.

**Fig. 4.** *Third Memory Drawing (9/16/63, 3:30 P.M.),* 1963. Ink on paper, 20 ½ X 13 inches (52.1 X 33 cm). Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of Robert Morris.

**Fig. 5.** *Fourth Memory Drawing (10/2/63, 9:00 P.M.),* 1963. Ink on paper, 20 ½ X 13 inches (52.1 X 33 cm). Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of Robert Morris.

**Fig. 6.** *Blind Time I,* 1973. Graphite on paper, 35 X 46 inches (88.9 X 116.8 cm) National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Photo courtesy of Robert Morris.

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Fig. 7. *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*, 1961. Walnut box, speaker, tape, 9 ¾ X 9 ¾ X 9 ¾ inches (24.8 X 24.8 X 24.8 cm). Seattle Museum of Art, Seattle. Gift of Bagley and Virginia Wright. Photo courtesy of Robert Morris.

Fig. 8. *Blind Time II*, 1976. Graphite and oil on etching paper, 38 X 50 inches (96.5 X 127 cm). Photo courtesy of Robert Morris.


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Fig. 11. *Blind Time V: Melancholia*, 1999. Ink on mylar, 29 ½ X 27 inches (74.93 X 68.58 cm). Private Collection, New York. Photo courtesy of Bill Schillinger.


Fig. 13. *Untitled (Gori Labyrinth)*, 1982. Green and white marble, 39 X 39 X 6 ½ feet (12 X 12 X 2 m). Collection of Giuliano Gori. Photo courtesy of Bill Schillinger.

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